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Introduction to Tuscany & Umbria

Tuscany and Umbria harbour the classic landscapes of Italy, familiar from a thousand Renaissance paintings, with their backdrop of medieval hill-towns, rows of cypresses, vineyards and olive groves, and artfully sited villas and farmhouses. It's a stereotype that has long held an irresistible attraction for northern Europeans. Shelley referred to Tuscany as a "paradise of exiles", and ever since his time the English, in particular, have seen the region as an ideal refuge from a sun-starved and overcrowded homeland.

The outsiders' perspective may be distorted, but the central provinces – especially in Tuscany – are indeed the essence of Italy in many ways. The national language evolved from Tuscan dialect, a supremacy ensured by Dante, who wrote the *Divine Comedy* in the vernacular of his birthplace, Florence. Other great Tuscan writers of the period – Petrarch and Boccaccio – reinforced its status, and in the nineteenth century Manzoni came here to purge his vocabulary of any impurities while working on *The Betrothed*, the most famous of all Italian novels. But what makes this area pivotal to the culture not just of Italy but of all Europe is, of course, the **Renaissance**, that extraordinarily creative era that takes its name from another Tuscan, Giorgio Vasari, who wrote in the sixteenth century of the "rebirth" of the arts with the humanism of Giotto and his successors.

Nowadays Tuscany and Umbria are among the wealthiest regions of the modern Italian state, a prosperity founded partly on **agriculture** and **tourism**, but largely on their industrial centres, which are especially conspicuous in the Arno valley. Nonetheless, both Tuscany and Umbria are predominantly **rural**, with great tracts of land still looking much as they did half a millennium ago. Just as the **hill-towns** mould themselves to the summits, the terraces of vines follow the lower contours of the hills and open fields spread across the broader **valleys**, forming a distinctive balance between the natural and human world.

Where to go

Florence was the most active centre of the Renaissance: almost every eminent artistic figure from Giotto onwards is represented here in an unrivalled gathering of **churches, galleries and museums**. But although Florence tends to take the limelight today, the longstanding rivalries between the towns of Tuscany and Umbria ensured that pictures and palaces were sponsored by everyone who could afford them. Exquisite Renaissance works adorn almost every place of any size, from the coast to the Apennine slopes of eastern Umbria, while many towns can boast artistic projects every bit as ambitious as those to be seen in Florence – the stunning fresco cycles in **Arezzo** (by Piero della Francesca), **Orvieto** (Luca Signorelli), **Siena** (Pinturicchio), **San Gimignano** (Benozzo Gozzoli), **Montefalco** (Gozzoli again), **Assisi** (Giotto and others), **Perugia** (Perugino) and **Prato** (Fra' Filippo Lippi) are just a selection of the region's riches.

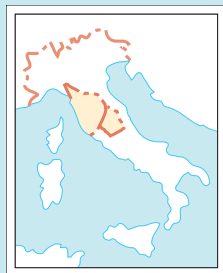
And of course the art of the Renaissance did not spring out of thin air: both Tuscany and Umbria can boast a cultural lineage that stretches back to the time of Charlemagne and beyond. **Lucca** has some of the most handsome Romanesque buildings in Europe, and **Pisa** is another city whose heyday came in the Middle Ages – its Campo dei Miracoli, with the Leaning Tower, is one of Europe's most brilliant monumental ensembles. **Siena's** red-brick medieval cityscape makes a refreshing contrast with the darker tones of Florence, while a tour through Umbria can seem like a procession of







ADRIATIC SEA



SAN MARINO

MARCHE

UMBRIA

LAZIO

ABRUZZO

TUSCANY AND UMBRIA

FACT FILE

TUSCANY

- **Tuscany** (Toscana) has a population of around 3.8 million, with some 385,000 in Florence, its capital.

- The region is bordered by the **sea** to the west, and by the Apennine **mountains** to the east; in the north lie the Alpi Apuane (where Monte Prado reaches 2054m), while in the south rises Monte Amiata. South of Livorno lies the coastal **plain** of the Maremma. Tuscany has more **woodland** than any other Italian region.

- Tourism is a major contributor to the region's **economy**, as are agriculture (especially beef, wine and olive oil) and textile production, which is concentrated in the Arno valley and Prato.

UMBRIA

- **Umbria** is the only landlocked region of the Italian peninsula. Of its 900,000 **population**, 170,000 live in Perugia, the capital.

- The **terrain** is gentler than Tuscany, but the Apennines run along the eastern border where, in the Sibillini mountains, Monte Vettore reaches 2476m just over the border in Marche. Some thirty percent of Umbria is woodland.

- Perugia manufactures food and clothing, and factories dot the Vale of Spoleto, but the major **industries** (steel, chemicals, textiles, paper and food) are in the south, around Terni. Traditional **crafts** are also significant, especially pottery.

magnificent ancient hill-towns. The attractions of **Assisi** (birthplace of St Francis), **Spoleto** and the busy provincial capital of **Perugia** are well known, but other Umbrian towns – such as **Gubbio**, **Bevagna** and **Todi** – retain plentiful evidence of their ancient past, too.

The variety of **landscapes** within this comparatively small area is astounding. A short distance from central Florence spread the thickly wooded uplands of **Mugello** and the **Casentino**, while Lucca is a springboard for the **Alpi Apuane**, whose mountain quarries have supplied Europe's masons with white marble for centuries. Along the Tuscan shoreline, the resorts are interspersed by some of Italy's best-kept wildlife reserves, including the fabulous **Monti dell'Uccellina**, the last stretch of virgin coast in the whole country. Out in the **Tuscan archipelago**, the island of **Giglio** is relatively unspoilt by the sort of tourist development that has infiltrated – though certainly not ruined – nearby **Elba**.

Landlocked Umbria may not be as varied as its neighbour, but the wild heights of the **Valnerina**, the **Piano Grande**'s prairie-like expanse and the savage peaks of the **Monti Sibillini** all contrast with the tranquil, soft-contoured hills with which the region is most often associated.

When to go

Midsummer in central Italy is not as pleasant an experience as you might imagine: the heat can be stifling, and from **May to September** the big tourist hotspots of Florence, Siena and San Gimignano are too crowded to be really enjoyable. If at all possible, avoid **August**, when the majority of Italians take their holidays: many restaurants and hotels close, and the beaches are jammed solid. It's best to visit shortly **before Easter** or in the **late autumn** – the towns are quieter then, and the countryside is blossoming or taking on the tones of the harvest season. The Umbrian climate varies slightly from Tuscany's, chiefly because of its distance from the sea;

SAINTS

Florence has **St Peter Martyr** and the more obscure **St Giovanni Gualberto**; Siena has **St Catherine**, joint patron of Italy, and **St Bernardino**, patron saint of advertising...but Tuscany's roll-call of the holy is meagre compared to that of its neighbour, the so-called *terra dei santi* ("land of the saints"). Umbria's towns and villages are littered with **shrines** to holy men and women, the greatest of them being the church dedicated to **St Francis** in Assisi, which stands a short distance from the resting-place of his devout companion, **St Clare**. The founder of western monasticism, **St Benedict**, hailed from Norcia, not far from the hometown of **St Rita**, patron saint of the impossible. And just outside Terni, there's a pilgrimage site dedicated to **St Valentine**, thought to have been born there. The one Umbrian saint who could be said to rival the fame of Francis, Valentine differs from him in one crucial respect: in all likelihood, he didn't exist.

temperatures in summer are fractionally higher here, while the hill-top towns can be surprisingly windy and cool at other times. **Winter** is often quite rainy, but the absence of crowds makes this a good option for the cities on the major art trails. Bear in mind, however, that high-altitude roads are impassable in midwinter, and in places such as the Sibillini the snow might not melt until as late as April.

It's always worth checking when each town has its **festivals** or pilgrimages (see p.31). Accommodation is tricky during these mini-peak seasons, but some of the festivities – such as Siena's famous **Palio** and Gubbio's semi-pagan **Corsa dei Ceri** – are enjoyable enough to merit planning a trip around. Costumed **jousts** and other martial displays are a feature of several town calendars, notable examples being the jousts in Pistoia and Arezzo and the twice-yearly **crossbow competitions** between Gubbio and Sansepolcro. **Holy days** and **saints' days** bring in the crowds in equal numbers, with Assisi leading the way as the most venerated site.

